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Article (Accepted Version)

Frantzeskaki, Niki, Dumitru, Adina, Anguelovski, Isabelle, Avelino, Flor, Bach, Matthew, Best, Benjamin, Binder, Constanze, Barnes, Jake, Carrus, Giuseppe, Durrant, Rachael and et al, (2017) Elucidating the changing roles of civil society in urban sustainability transitions. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 22. pp. 41-50. ISSN 1877-3435

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Elucidating the changing roles of civil society in urban sustainability transitions

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Abstract

Understanding the diversifying role of civil society in Europe's sustainability pathway is a valid proposition both scientifically and socially. Civil society organisations already play a significant role in the reality of cities, what remains to be explored is the question: what is the role of civil society in the future sustainability of European cities? We first examine the novelty of new forms of civil society organization based on a thorough review of recent case studies of civil society initiatives for sustainable transitions across a diversity of European projects and an extensive literature review on the changing nature of civil society. We conceptualize a series of roles that civil society plays in current urban contexts and the tensions and dilemmas they entail. We argue that, firstly, civil society initiatives can pioneer new social relations and practices eventually leading to radical changes in ways of organizing urban life. Civil society can therefore be an integral part of urban transformations and can fill the void left by a retreating welfare state, thereby safeguarding and servicing social needs but also backing up such a rolling back of the welfare state. It can act as a hidden innovator – contributing to sustainability but remaining disconnected from the wider society. Assuming each of these roles can also have unintended effects, such as being proliferated by political agendas, which endanger its role and social mission, and can be peeled off to serve political agendas resulting in its disempowerment and over-exposure. We conclude with a series of implications for future research on the roles of civil society in urban sustainability transitions.

Key words: sustainability, justice, new markets, welfare states, transformations, civil society, grassroots

1. Introduction

European societies are faced with amalgamated crises: ecological degradation and loss of ecosystem functions, welfare systems that struggle to provide services needed to fulfill basic societal needs and maintain social security, and the resurfacing of dichotomies between social needs and aspirations of different social groups. In the midst of these crises, the conventional ways of dealing with problems and their manifestations appear ineffective. The complexity and magnitude of the challenges deem top-down steering approaches insufficient. Civil society has been playing a role in addressing sustainability challenges for the past several decades, and is a key actor contributing to sustainability transitions. Existing research describes civil society's ability to provide sustainability practices and services and demonstrates that it has diversified its activities beyond the historical role of civil advocacy [1]. While some civil society groups may provide basic services no longer met by the retreat of the state, others may play a critical role in helping to reshape unsustainable social, ecological, economic, and cultural practices and patterns. In part, the recent configurations of civil society have emerged in response to the challenges described above [2][3][4].

1.1 The nature of civil society

If we are to understand how civil society develops and participates in sustainability transitions, we need to have a clear articulation of what we understand as civil society. Some argue it encompasses grassroots and community-based organizations, advocacy groups (e.g. NGOs), coalitions, professional associations and other organizational forms [5], while others define it as all organizations that are "institutionally separate from the state" [6] and the market. One thing agreed upon in the literature is that the state and civil society are different, with civil society being somewhat autonomous from the state and acting upon interest and motivations that do not aspire to winning political office nor economic benefits [6]. The boundary between the two is not a rigid one given the many hybridized forms that have emerged. The relationships between organizations that represent civil society and the state are diverse, ranging from contestation and confrontation (this is why NGOs are sometimes described *as* civil society) to coalitions and partnerships that help provide state services (for example in the areas of health).

1.2 Examining the new situation with civil society

The fast-evolving changes in civil society discourses and organizational forms, as well as the high hopes it is asked to fulfill require a systematic scrutiny of the different roles civil society plays in sustainability transitions. This also relates to the shapes these roles take in different socio-economic and political contexts, across societal issues or domains (e.g. energy, food, mobility, built-environment and education) and across spatial scales (local, regional, national).

This paper is an outcome of an intense collaboration of researchers across four European research projects (ARTS, GLAMURS, TESS, and TRANSIT) that convened in a workshop on 2014 in Rotterdam, The Netherlands to investigate the role of civil society in sustainability transitions. During the workshop, a wide diversity of empirical cases informed the discussion and deepened the

questions on how to systematically conceptualize the roles of civil society in sustainability transitions and how to search for new evidence. The discussed empirical cases are documented in Table 1 and feature in depth empirical cases that are researched by pan-European research teams with a focus on sustainability transitions in cities. The case presentations and debates at the workshop allowed researchers with an in-depth knowledge of specific case studies to identify the recurrence of three different roles civil society plays and three categories of risks they face in their interactions with state institutions and actors that we address as unintended effects.

This initial inductive analytical framework was then used to orient a thorough literature review, in order to systematize a larger pool of analyzed cases in urban sustainability transitions in Europe (Table 1). The review covered articles from 2010 to 2016 with some key additional references of earlier years (Table 2). Even though a large number of publications had been identified (1083 papers in total) and thoroughly reviewed, we emphasize here those that take a critical perspective on the interactions and inter-dependencies between civil society and urban systems of provision and governance and support our conceptualisation of the new roles of civil society (111 papers). The critical literature review reports on papers that address and/or implicate the conceptualized roles presented in this paper and go beyond the typical role of civil society as an advocate of civil rights that dominated the evidence in earlier writings from 1970s to 2000s. Our paper stands out by being inductively built from a plethora of contemporary empirical cases on the new roles of civil society (Table 1) and indicating 111 papers of the past 6 years that implicate similar roles without however bringing together the new conceptualization of roles into the foreground. Our paper features a new conceptualization of roles of civil society as active contributing to urban sustainability transitions.

This paper has a threefold aim. First, we discuss the roles civil society in sustainability transitions, building from a systematic review of cases from various domains (energy, water, food, education, land use change, biodiversity) in urban contexts. Second, we critically examine these roles and the unintended effects that arise from the interaction with other societal actors and their agendas for civil society. Third, we elaborate on the implications of these roles and interactions for a new research agenda, including directions for empirical explorations.

2. The roles of civil society

The roles civil society assumes and the ways in which it interacts with other actors are diverse. Far from attempting to describe all possible roles, we choose to focus on the three most important roles of civil society. We critically examine their interactions with other elements and actors across specific contexts in which they operate. In so doing, we seek to engage critically with the idea of civil society as having a pre-determined, uniform role with regard to sustainability. This allows us to consider how the wider context influences the roles that civil society can play.

A common assumption is that civil society plays an inherently positive role in processes supporting democracy and sustainability [7]. Local initiatives can *pioneer and model new practices that can then be picked up by other actors* (e.g. policy makers), eventually leading to incremental or radical changes in practices and ways of organizing things. Civil society can therefore be an integral part of such transformations. It connects what was not connected, triggering wider change. Civil society

can also fill the void left by a retreating welfare state, thereby attempting to safeguard and service social needs otherwise neglected. Last, it can act as a *disconnected innovator* – initiatives may in fact contribute to sustainability but remain disconnected from the wider society.

--- INSERT TABLE 1 HERE ---

---INSERT TABLE 2 HERE ---

2.1 Civil society as a driver of sustainability transitions

In the last decades, we have witnessed increasing skepticism about the ability of dominant state-based institutions to produce sustainability transformations, and growing distrust in their interest to adopt a social and ecological agenda alongside economic and political agendas (Birch & Whittam, 2008). We argue that civil society performs a new role in this regard: altering values and beliefs towards more sustainable ones, contributing to social-ecological and economic literacy and putting knowledge into action for sustainability [25].

Civil society actors have the knowledge, flexibility and capacity to bring about projects that directly contribute to environmental sustainability, thus demonstrating their feasibility as legitimate alternatives in most of the cases [6,8,66]. Due to their proximity to local contexts, flexibility due to operating on the fringes of complex bureaucratic settings [9] and elasticity, civil society organisations seem able to foster transformative innovation by and through their actions and participation in social and policy processes. An amounting body of literature and recent empirical knowledge (Tables 1 and 2) recognize that it is the local understanding and local knowledge that civil society has that catalyzes the “tailoring to local context” and consequently can synergize new ideas and new approaches for more socially responsible governance [8, 9 p. 869, 37]. Having strong connections to local actors and networks contributes to them gaining (process and outcome) legitimacy and becoming a credible interlocutor for powerful policy institutions such as those affecting the EU, as cases such as the Slow Food Movement, or, the study of a Spanish credit cooperative illustrate in TRANSIT project [6]. As such, civil society can advocate for more radical and progressive ideas rather than “returning to old ideals” [14 p.27]. Civil society fosters and re-establishes connections between people and nature, creating ecological experiences and ecological memory in urban citizens that are fundamental to ecological dimension of sustainability [98,99, 100]. Such rapid experimentation in the local context makes civil society a potential driver of sustainability transitions [4, 8, 9, 10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28,29,30, 31,32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42].

Zooming into the workings of transition initiatives led by civil society, they can provide empirical ground, or, proof-of-concept for new market forms (e.g. shared economy, or economy of the common good; [101]), or, for new economic structures (co-management, cooperatives, alternative currencies; [26,34] by responding to a market need in a socially responsible and value-creating way [28]. Civil society organizations may play a mediating role between individual citizens and local and state institutions when they are trusted by the individuals due to their use of “locally legitimate mechanisms” in the mediation and communication [7]. When such conditions are met, they can empower citizens to facilitate the seeking of new courses of action, while serving as mediums for individual political engagement [5].

Civil society organisations do not operate in isolation, but interact in many ways with the dominant government and market logics. This raises questions concerning their relationship with these ‘centres of power’ and how it affects their ability to be truly transformative. Tensions occur when civil society actors face the dilemma of growing and adapting, which entails compromises in order to “fit and conform” to the system in which they operate [27] and the risk of capture, or, maintain a separate space in which purity of principles and values can be sustained and new practices can be aligned with them. In the latter, they challenge dominant institutions to “stretch” and sometimes become transformed by such interactions.

2.2. Civil society as the safeguard and self-servicing actor of social needs and social conflicts

Some civil society organizations operate as servicing social needs within communities that have been neglected—or even abandoned- by the state or, the market [1,3,4,5,6,7,19,23,26,37,43,44,45, 46,47,48,49,50,51,52,53,54,55,56,57,58,59,60,61,62,63,64,65,66,67,68,69,70]. They establish self-help dynamics [43,59,] and are part of the awakening social order that is able to have an “expanded sense of self” (following the new values of an aware and engaged citizenry by [26] and explore new social relations and new practices, as social innovation analysis in the TRANSIT project reflects. They provide access to alternative services and ways to satisfy needs that make the adoption of sustainable lifestyles and cohesive societies possible, while creating the incipient social norms that support new sustainable institutions [82]. Local civil society can counterbalance the effects of neoliberal policies, sustain democratic processes via representing citizen’s interests and voice [37,38] and, in this way, reflect “renewed forms of democracy, solidarity and embrace of difference” [3, p.2799].

Civil society organizations and their networks create polycentric arrangements via co-provision of services [57,58] supporting more economically resilient communities, or “consisting in economies of specialization and flexibility” [55, p. 35]. However, this raises the question of them being seen as replacing the functions of a retreating welfare state [97], and becoming committed to certain courses of action and/or stretched to a point to which their innovative potential, flexibility and elasticity get compromised and erode, as their already limited resources are overwhelmed by existing demands and institutionalized expectations. In such cases, they might play right into the logics of mainstream institutions, by shifting the burden of provision from the state to civil society organizations (potentially *reinforcing* the retreat of the state), and a more nuanced understanding of the multiple rationalities underpinning the forms they take might be needed [41]. We see this is an attempt of capture by dominant institutions, which can neutralize or even compromise the innovative and contestation potential of civil society, while civil society actors find diverse answers to these and their resistance strategies also vary [94,97].

2.3 Civil society as a disconnected innovator

Civil society can act as a disconnected innovator that may contribute to urban sustainability, while often remaining disconnected from other social, cultural, and ecological systems and cross-scale dynamics [1,5,20,22,43,48,50,56,57,59,65,71,72,73,74,75,76,77,78,79,80,81,82]. Researchers increasingly note that in some cases, this is due to a desire of by civil society actors to remain ‘below the radar’, explaining that exposure comes at the expense of time and effort of their founding

mission. The reluctance of civil society actors to become visible can be viewed in a number of ways: (a) It could be the result of negative experiences, in which they have been used and co-opted by others, (b) it could be fearing and/or resisting of the responsibility of taking on board more actions or services than initially aiming for [97] (c) a survival strategy due to their continuous dependence on crowd sourced or philanthropy money to sustain their operation that occupies most of their time when not 'practising sustainability' and/or, (d) it could be an expression of a desire to step away from the wider society and pursue one's own aspirations and ideas "far from the maddening crowd" [1,5]. The challenge is that—hidden from local government's view- their practices and impacts remain disconnected and may never have a broader impact across different scales.

Although the desire to maintain a certain degree of independence from government has always been a characteristic of civil society, the importance attached to this distance and the solutions encountered to balance autonomy and involvement with other actors, including government, have changed. Many civil society organizations express the need to maintain a certain degree of autonomy, and distance in order to maintain their innovative potential and practice, and they find different ways of doing so, as appropriate for different stages in their development and contingent upon their internal and external interactions. While they may be more able to do so at the beginning of their foundation, long-established civil society organizations find different solutions to the dilemmas entailed by growing and pressured to up-scale. In many cases, they find a balance between maintaining autonomy and becoming a credible and legitimate alternative to the status quo, as case study reports conclude in both TRANSIT and GLAMURS projects. In some cases, the local civil society initiatives play the role of disconnected innovators, but international networks that are aware of their work may draw on their knowledge and innovative initiatives to act as drivers of sustainability transitions. This raises the question of whether alternative pathways that rely on civil society maintaining its original alternative status would work better with respect to the creative ways they achieve this balance [102]. [71] point out those community energy initiatives, for example, are 'seedbeds of innovation' questioning the dominant energy practices and institutions but typically having little impact on policy change. Again, this raises the question of the position civil society organizations can occupy between over-exposure and remaining in the shadows, and the effects that these different positions have on contributing and facilitating urban transformations to sustainability.

3. Unintended effects of the three roles

Civil society actors of diverse organizational forms do not exist in a vacuum but interact with dominant institutions and other actors in many ways. Both the internal dynamics of civil society organizations as well as their multifold interactions with others will determine how they situate themselves between the poles of maintaining a complete outsider status -existing as a contingent, even "shadow" system -or significantly engaging with dominant institutions and become respected voices in policy debates. Most successful sustainability initiatives with transformative aims achieve a balance between maintaining purity of principles, thus becoming a credible alternative to existing systems of provision, and growing and changing in response to pressures and actions of dominant institutions, thus becoming powerful actors with independent roles in sustainability

transformations. Understanding the different solutions they find to these dilemmas pertains as an open empirical question.

One risk is that civil society initiatives can be used or co-opted by neoliberal agendas to support neoliberal narratives about decentralization and the need for “small” government [83, 103]. What appears as support and acclaim of the potential of civil society organizations in sustainability transitions is sometimes a tool to legitimize and make excuses for the retreat of the state from the provision of basic services such as elderly care and education [52]. By relying on civil society for service delivery, there is a risk of deepening social inequalities within and between communities, given uneven capacities to self-organize. In this regard, the state further neglects structural injustice and masks ineffective governance by empowering civil society at the outset, and by reassigning responsibility from government onto local actors [3]. How civil society organizations can determine the best strategies to resist such capture [103], while at the same time assuring they have the resources to operate, remains a question for future research to grapple.

If state reassigns former responsibilities to civil society actors, it can—intentionally or not—suffocate civil society organisations with complex and weighty bureaucratic procedures [3, 52, 55, 75, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 104]. Moreover, some governments may intervene by establishing or incentivizing the establishment of specific civil society organizations, which in turn explicitly aim to serve policy agendas [2, 92]. In this case, viewing civil society establishments as the “visible hand of the state” may demoralize and delegitimize individuals to create bottom-up civil society organizations, undercutting local democratic politics [105]. The overexposure resulting from (what could be considered) a capture of civil society organizations by the state can leave these actors exhausted and erode any potential of a grassroots mission [2,3,6,18,19,35,38,45,55,58,88,90,91,92,93,94,95,96,97].

4. A new research agenda

To summarize the arguments put forth in this paper, we contend, based on extensive empirical research and literature review, that:

- Civil society actors have the potential to showcase the feasibility of legitimate sustainability alternatives. In their attempts to do so, they engage in a wide variety of interactions with government and market logics. Both positive and negative effects can result from such interactions, and a systematic understanding of both the potential and the tensions of civil society actors in sustainability transitions is currently lacking, as well as a careful analysis of the endogenous and exogenous forces that drive these outcomes.
- Examination and understanding of the conditions under which civil society plays a transformative role in sustainability transitions is needed so as to inform policy and community practice for sustainability in urban environments. Conditions may vary between local and national contexts that also include democratic institutions and transparency in governance processes and how they play out in the attended role by civil society as a driver for sustainability transitions.
- Choices that civil society actors take to strike a balance between overexposure and remaining in the shadows but disconnected, and the effects during different stages of their

development need to be better examined. This requires a wider variety of cases to be analyzed, cross-compared and examined, and need to include both successful and unsuccessful ones.

A few reflections for a new research agenda can be formulated based on this (brief) account of the changing roles of civil society. We propose three overarching directions below:

Adopt a dynamic understanding of the role of civil society and use empirical designs that can capture their fluid and contextual nature. While civil society organizations are hailed as the positive wave of change, we need to break away from overly positive assumptions regarding their effects, and empirically investigate questions of the different roles civil society actors play in complex configurations of interactions and agendas. Cross-case study analyses and meta-analyses, rather than solely in-depth single case study research, would contribute to understanding both the bright and the dark sides of civil society roles today. Single case studies should also focus on longitudinal analyses, as researching cases at different stages of their development would provide insight into the dilemmas faced in engagement with dominant institutions, how they are resolved, and what this means for sustainability transitions. In order to avoid simplifications, civil society actors should be incorporated in research design and research cycles to allow for a new understanding of the diversity of civil society and its multiple roles.

Conceptualize and empirically explore the dynamic interactions between civil society actors and other actors and elements in the contexts in which they are embedded. Rich conceptualizations of contexts that include geographical scale but also wider trends in values, and perceptions of roles of different actors are still largely missing from the literature. So too are analyses that compare across types of transitions themselves. Future empirical research should thus identify the conditions under which civil society may play a transformational role versus those that mainly lead it to contribute to perpetuate the status quo.

Understand and assess the true diversity of civil society in the present context. Civil society has a very fluid and flexible nature that enables it to operate outside immobilizing constraints. As they become relevant actors in transformations towards sustainability, they are also at risk of adopting the cumbersome organizational forms and procedures from which they distanced themselves at the start. Studied cases should reflect a variety of organizational forms, levels of success, and forms of engagement with dominant institutions, and avoid the bias towards successful ones, or those that resisted and grew over time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is based on research carried out as part of the ARTS Project, Accelerating and Rescaling Sustainability Transitions Project funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) (grant agreement 603654), the *Green Lifestyles, Alternative Models and Upscaling Regional Sustainability* ("GLAMURS") project, funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) (grant agreement 613420) and the *Transformative Social Innovation Theory*

("TRANSIT") project which is funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) under grant agreement 613169. The views expressed in this article are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union. Authors are thankful to Dr. Leen Gorrissen for critical comments on an earlier draft of this paper and to Dr. Dominik Reusser (Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Germany), Dr. Peter Knorringa (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands), and Felix Spira (DRIFT, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands) for their valuable contributions during the workshop in 2014.

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